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Farm Life Conditions in the South

Chapter VIII

The Church as a Country Life Defense



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STATE NORMAL SCHOOL
ATHENS, GA.

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THE STATE NORMAL SCHOOL
ATHENS, GA.

First. We believe that education is a reciprocal union with society.

Second. We believe that social conditions determine all efficient school functioning.

Third. We believe that the output of the Georgia State Normal School should be teachers who are aflame with rational ideals and purposes; but who are also steeped in reality, to their very throatlatches.

Fourth. We believe that the teachers of this faculty should be intimately acquainted with the indoor concerns of their departments, intimately acquainted with the best that the great world is thinking and doing in their departments; but also that they should be accurately schooled in outdoor, economic and social conditions, causes, and consequences in Georgia, in direct, first-hand ways.

Fifth. We believe that the school is one of the mightiest agencies of social uplift; and that no teacher can help to make this school such an agency unless he is directly and vitally related to the human-life problems of the community and the state.

Sixth. We believe that a teacher has a right to be a citizen and a patriot; that to be less than either or both is to be a mere teacher; and that a mere teacher is something less than a full statured man or woman--a tertium quid, a third sex, it may be, a neuter!

Seventh. We believe that this school has betrayed the high calling whereunto the State has called it if its graduates do not set their hands to their tasks as teacher-citizen-patriots, as lovers of their kind and their country, with keen realization of home conditions and needs, with mighty and mellow sympathy and concern, with growing love for community and county, state and country, and with high resolve to glorify common tasks, common duties, and common relationships in faithful, self-forgetful devotion.

Eighth. We believe that in the measure in which we and they shall satisfy these ideals will we all love the school more, our home counties more, our state more, and serve them better, both now and in all the years to come.

December 5th, 1911.

THE CHURCH AS A COUNTRY-LIFE DEFENSE:

A Study in Home Missions.

(An address delivered before the Georgia Students
Missionary League, Nov. 10, 1911.)

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1. **Prefatory.** When I think of the student body of the world, the prophet Joel's vision comes into my mind, and I see "Multitudes, multitudes in the Valley of Decision." Surely the Day of the Lord is near to the students of this Missionary League, in the Valley of Decision, very near! Because these are they that choose for themselves nothing, but for others everything!

My prayer is that the spirit may be poured out upon us; that our young men may see visions of the Kingdom of God, enlarged visions of it, as they never saw it before; and that our sons and daughters may be prophecies and promises of its coming. Then indeed shall our old men dream dreams of The New Jerusalem come down out of Heaven to dwell upon earth among men; and altogether we shall set ourselves at last to the social tasks of Christianity.

I have long had at hand on my desk the diary of a devout layman. It contains nothing but the words of the Master himself. As I read and re-read the words of Him who spake as never man spake, I wonder more and more if the church has fully conceived her mission in the world. He spoke often and much about the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Heaven. He spoke seldom and little about the church.

When the church, in its ideals and activities, has moved forward into the fuller meaning of the Kingdom, as it was in the mind of Jesus; when nothing that touches humanity is alien to Christian concern; when we cease to consider the work-a-day affairs of men as common and unclean; when life and lip are in sweet accord in Christian civilization; when the followers of Christ really love mercy, do justly and walk humbly with God, then His Kingdom will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. Then will the church cease to serve strangers in a land which is not yet her own; then she may claim the heathen for

an inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for a possession.

What is barely suggested here, in preliminary way, you will find in the large and at length in Batten's Social Task of Christianity, in Rauschenbusch's Christianity and the Social Crisis, in the books of Josiah Strong, Patten, Peabody and many others who are glimpsing the Kingdom in new and inspiring ways.

2. **The Importance of the Country Church.** More and more our modern industrial city civilization preempts interest and attention. But we cannot safely blink the fundamental importance of our rural civilization. Undoubtedly the city is the final challenge to Christianity; but the country church is the recruiting station for the warfare. It has always been so. "The cities cannot be relied upon to furnish the Christian leaders of the future. The work of the church in the country districts must be carried on with efficiency and power in order to insure the raising up of sufficient Christian forces to cultivate the city fields."

John R. Mott, from whom I have quoted, sees clearly that the life and well-being of the church in the city is dependent upon the life and well-being of the church in the countryside. Five-sixths of the ministers and six-sevenths of the college professors of America were born and reared in the country, says Ashenhurst

Three-fourths of the men in authority in our city churches were bred and 'battered' in the rural regions; and the same ratio is nearly true of the successful, influential men of affairs, the merchants and manufacturers, the bankers and lawyers. I may add that twenty-six of the twenty-seven presidents of the United States were country born.

The cities are dependent upon the countryside for population, for the renewal of population, for business, for business genius, for civic and social conscience, and for spiritual guidance. If the cities were not re-enforced from the fields, said Emerson, they would have rotted, exploded, and disappeared long ago. Fat cities and a lean countryside will mean in the end the decay of the country school and the country church, the two great country-life defenses; and the decay of rural civilization will imperil our national well-being.

What, therefore, is the status of the country church, what forces, are insidiously threatening its efficiency, even its very existence, here and there?

3. **The Status of the Country Church** began to arouse interest thirty years ago. In 1890, five counties of New York state were exhaustively studied, two in the central part of the state, and one in each of the three lobes. Many Protestant

churches were seen falling into decay, or abandoned long since to bats and brickbats. In one village the investigators found two disused Protestant churches, one active Catholic church, and fourteen saloons, all within the distance of a quarter of a mile. In another town they found a Presbyterian church used as a barn, a Baptist church abandoned, two Methodist churches almost extinct, and a Baptist Seminary used as a Catholic church; while on the Erie Canal for eight miles were found scattered hamlets containing altogether a considerable population with no religious services of any kind from one year's end to another. And the report states that these five counties are fairly representative of the rural districts of New York state.

Similar studies have since been made of country-life conditions in all the New England states, in Ohio and Pennsylvania, and recently in the state of Illinois. Rev. M. B. McNutt reported last July to the Rural Life Conference in Lansing, Mich., that there were ten thousand dead rural churches in Illinois; ten thousand more about to die; and five hundred already abandoned.

But what is the status of the country church in the South, and in Georgia?

One of the great religious denominations of the South, consisting of thirty-five hundred churches, has one thousand thirty-two churches without pastors, mainly country churches. Last year sixteen hundred of the churches had no additions by confession of faith. In four Southern states, the churches of this denomination suffered a net loss of nearly 1500 members. This church is losing its grip upon the country-life problem. As might be expected, therefore, there were fewer graduates from her seminaries last year, and fewer candidates for the ministry among the graduates of her church colleges.

Only just the other day I happened to stumble into the report of a group of forty-one churches in middle Georgia. Twenty of these churches are without Sunday Schools. Nineteen of them gave nothing to missions last year. One of the churches, a city church, gave 78 per cent of the whole amount contributed to missions by this group. Seven churches are without pastors. Six churches pay for preaching less than \$90 a year, one of them only \$70.00. Twenty of these churches report no new members by profession of faith.

I then began to study conditions closer home. Choosing at random, I found a group of thirty-three churches in North Georgia, ten of which had no Sunday Schools; eleven no pastors, and five of them pastors temporarily supplied. Nine of these churches with two hundred seventy-six members gave nothing to missions; eleven of them gave nothing to foreign missions; twelve nothing to home missions; seventeen nothing to negro

evangelization; and twenty of the thirty-three Sunday Schools nothing to Sunday School extension. Thirteen of the churches report no new members by profession of faith. One church of this group, a city church, gave 66 per cent of the total amount raised for foreign missions.

Diligent inquiry among ministers of all sects and sorts brings the uniform response that these two groups of churches are fairly representative of the country church everywhere.

These ominous facts pertinently raise the question of whether the country church is growing in efficiency or dwindling in effort and influence.

Is the country church more and more, or less and less, a problem as the years go on; and what causes imperil its usefulness and existence?

4. **The Menaces to the Country Church** are, first of all, economic. The race is moving steadily and surely into a new era. It is an era of industrial city civilization, and the movement is a world-wide movement. It is the result of applied science, the invention of labor saving machinery, and the development of facilities for transportation and distribution.

There is a steady drift of country population city-ward. Thus five states of the Union (New Hampshire, Connecticut, Ohio, Iowa, and Missouri) show an actual loss of country population, in the last decade. In six other states the cities grew from ten to forty-one times faster than the country population. Throughout the entire United States the growth of city population was nearly four times greater than the growth of country population.

In Georgia the growth of city population was three and a half times greater than the growth of country population. Twenty-five counties of the state lost population during the last decade. Two of these lost nearly one-third of their entire population. In forty-one counties of the state the gain was less than the natural increase by birth. One of these counties gained just twelve and another just thirty-four people in the ten years. Thus there are sixty-six counties in the state that have either lost population or have marked time during the last ten years. These counties may well look to their country-life defenses, especially to improved public highways, better schools, and more liberally supported churches.

Now, the loss of population by a community or county menaces every business and social interest in it. Stores and dwellings become vacant, rents decline, trade drops off, land values decrease, tenants become restless and vagrant, schools and churches dwindle, life and enterprise drop into stagnation and decay. Witness the two hundred and eighty-two pastorless country churches in Maine, many of them used as cheese facto-

ries, road houses, and dance halls. Witness the million, two hundred thousand acres of abandoned farm land in New York state. Witness the decay of manhood in Adams county, Ohio. Witness, in Iowa, the twenty-five hundred country schools in which the average attendance has dwindled to ten pupils or fewer.

In Georgia, we have three counties containing fewer than ten people to the square mile, one of these less than five; and yet one county of this group has a smaller population to-day than it had ten years ago. In many counties of Georgia, it takes more than thirty square miles to furnish enough white children to maintain a country school. One of our students taught last year in a county eleven miles away from the nearest church.

In one county there are so few people living on and cultivating their own farms that they have abandoned in despair all thought of improved public highways, and in self-defense have at last come together to build a good public highway as a private enterprise.

In another group of nine counties, the tenant whites have moved into the nearby cotton mill center and the land-owners have left the country to secure better church and school advantages. The country civilization of these counties has been abandoned for the most part to negro tenant-farmers and to negro civilization, such as it is. It goes without saying that in such counties as these country schools and country churches have dropped into decay, and when you look straight at human-life conditions here you are appalled and staggered at the social problems that present themselves.

Increasing sparsity of population means increasing loneliness and drudgery and monotony in the farm regions; decreasing ability to maintain schools and churches, and increasing illiteracy and immorality. For instance, in one of these sparsely settled counties a man swaps his daughter for his neighbor's wife and gives potatoes to-boot in the trade; all without consideration of civil or ecclesiastical forms. And this is not a mountain county, either.

The other day a minister told me that he had recently visited one of his old country churches; a church which aforetime was strong in members and spiritual influence, but which now has been abandoned by the nearby land-owners, who have moved away into the towns. The remaining large farmer, the leading official in the church, was found leading a life of gross immorality in his home, while the church has dwindled into insignificance or something worse.

5. Decreasing Farm Ownership and Increasing Tenancy. And this leads me to say that another economic cause is threatening the usefulness of the country church, even its very exist-

ence. It is the steadily decreasing ratio of farms occupied and tilled by the men that own them. The increase of landless farmers in Georgia is alarming. In 1900, three of every five farms in our state were cultivated by tenants; in 1910 the ratio was two in every three; in forty-five counties, seven in every ten; in fourteen counties, eight in every ten; and in one county, nine in every ten.

Imagine, if you can, the social outlook for farm civilization in sixty of our counties where seven or more farmers in every ten are landless and homeless. And the problem is further complicated by the fact that this population is transient, for the most part. They are brief sojourners in the community. In the best communities, the entire tenant population changes almost wholly every three years. Upon an average, in the entire South, three of every four renters every year move to new places in other neighborhoods or counties.

In the very nature of things they lack abiding interest in better methods, better business, and better living on the farm; in progressive community enterprises; in good roads, good schools, and good churches. Industrious, thrifty, prosperous, stable community life is rooted and grounded in the home-owning, home-loving, home-defending instinct. It augurs ill for Georgia that the farms cultivated by owners fell from 55 to 34 in the hundred, during the last thirty years!

But the dwindling ratio of farm- and home-ownership is not peculiar to Georgia. It is true of almost every state in the Union. In 1900, almost exactly one-half of all the people of the United States were landless and homeless, and the number of those that have no stake in the land grows alarmingly greater from decade to decade.

When our civilization is bottomed, like England's, upon land ownership by the few and land orphanage for the many, then we shall be confronted by problems that stagger education and religion, the church and the state alike.

Almost everything is possible in a community or county or country whose population consists of a large number of small land-owners, instead of a small number of large land-owners.

Isaiah saw clearly the social ills that follow "the joining of house to house and the laying of field to field". But never in my life have I heard a sermon from that text, by any minister in any pulpit whatsoever. Everywhere we need the social instinct and interest and insight of this prophet of old; and never more than now in seventy-three counties of this state.

Is this a gloomy summary of conditions and causes? If so, then I may say that it is my profound belief that we shall never be adequately motivated, never under a great headway of patriotic

and spiritual fervor, until we have comprehended our problem and see clearly the obstacles upon the one hand and the ideals and opportunities upon the other.

It was Nehemiah's way. You may recall that he insisted upon knowing his task in detail before he set his hand to it. In the darkness of the night he left the city by the valley gate and went about the broken-down defenses of Jerusalem; in many places, I dare say, upon his very hands and knees. It will not do, as we give ourselves to the task of creating an effective, satisfying rural civilization, to be less wise or less brave than Nehemiah. In no otherwise shall we escape being inept, inapt, and futile in our efforts.

6. **The Country Church Needs a New Ideal**, in order to grow in efficiency as a country life defense. It must still be a center for community worship: it must become the center of social service.

For instance, it must generously mother the nearby public school, and fervently concern itself in behalf of better buildings, better fixtures, furnitures, and equipments, longer terms, better teachers, and better teaching, rewarded by better salaries.

Sometime ago I spoke to a great audience in the old Mt. Zion camp-meeting tabernacle in middle Georgia. For seventy-five years the nearby day-school has been under the drippings of the sanctuary there. But I found that school "a ragged beggar by the wayside sunning"; and I said to my audience, Not yet is Mt. Zion the glory of all the earth!

I believe with all my heart that public education in Georgia will be a vain and unavailing task until the church comes up to the help of the State, against ignorance and illiteracy, narrowness and superstition. Otherwise we must always bewail the fact that the people perish for lack of knowledge.

The teachers in the public school must be busy in the neighboring Sunday School and church; but the pastor and his official board need to cherish and nourish, support and sustain the neighboring day-school. Denominational differences and jealousies must disappear, in a sweet conspiracy for the well-being of the children of the community.

And this better day is breaking here and there. At a country Methodist church in Paulding county I found the public school located near the church, as is usually the case all over the state. A Presbyterian teacher taught the children in the day-school during the week and the same children in the church on Sunday. One day of the quarterly conference was given entirely to a discussion of country-life conditions, good roads, school libraries, public sanitation and better public schools, and not to sermons or connectional schools at all!

The pastor and presiding elder are men of understanding and vision; both young, virile and vigorous, and both of them crowned with the charms and gifts and graces of rare spirituality. May God multiply their kind abundantly in the earth!

The country church and the country school ought together to be the center of community life and activities—vocational, recreational and spiritual. Together they ought to organize and develop the garden club, the corn club, the mother's club, the reading circle and the neighborhood library; but also they must develop and direct the recreational life of the country regions. The all-day singing so common all over the state is the manifestation of a wholesome social instinct. This instinct does not need to be opposed or suppressed; it does need to be captured and skilfully directed to better ends.

We have long heard the cry for re-directed country schools. The need is even more urgent for re-directed country churches. The DuPage country church in Illinois is just such a church. It is easy to see that it is a mighty country-life defense. You will find a full account of it in the *World's Work*, September and December, 1910.

7. A Home for the Country Pastor. But the country church will fall short short of its possible efficiency unless there be alongside it, or in the immediate neighborhood, a home for the pastor. How else can he have part and lot in the fortunes of his people, and become keenly, sympathetically aware of community conditions and needs? How otherwise can he shepherd his flock daily and minister to their comfort and necessities in sickness and in health? Or nurse his Sunday School, or have an active, ever-present interest in the children in the day-school?

How can an absentee preacher, who lives apart and away from his charge, in the county-site town, or in another county, hope to make his church the center of the occupational, recreational and spiritual life of the community? He can be a preacher, but can he be a minister or a pastor? He can plant, but can he water? He can point to heaven, but can he lead the way?

There are thousands of prosperous country communities in Georgia abundantly able to furnish comfortable homes for the minister, and thus make efficient the mightiest of all agencies in checking the forces of country-life decay. But, after diligent inquiry these last thirteen months, I have been able to find in Georgia only two country churches with resident ministers, snugly settled in the country, in church homes. The possible efficiencies of the country church will never be fully realized otherwise.

On the other hand I find hundreds of country churches paying less than \$100 a year to the preacher for sermons once or twice

a month; many of them less than \$75, some less than \$50. In one of the most prosperous country communities of the state I found the preacher getting only \$60 a year. He is obliged to be both blacksmith and farmer in order to keep his soul and body together. His people grip their purses in tight fists while they pray the Lord 'to give him souls for his hire.' They promise to keep him poor, if the good Lord will only keep him humble.

The people of this and many another country community in Georgia could easily contribute twenty times the amount they are now giving to church support. And they would do it, if only they could be aroused to realize the potencies and possibilities of the church that is growing into the fuller meaning of the Kingdom.

8. **A Model Country Pastor.** And this leads me to say, in conclusion, that always in the pinches and crises of human affairs, God raises up a leader. Such a man was John Frederick Oberlin, who a century ago rescued the minds and bodies as well as the souls of his wretched little country parish, by a life informed with the mind of the Master. His preparation for his task, his spirit, his many-sided interests and activities, his sympathetic adjustability and adaptability, his simplicity, his swift directness of aim, his unflagging, unfailing courage, patience and hopefulness, his intense practicality and rare spirituality almost perfectly indicate just what the modern mission worker or country minister must know and be and do in a rural community, or any other, if he would win it for the Kingdom.

His charge was the Ban-de-la-Roche, a poverty-stricken little valley in the Vosges mountains. His call to it was a challenge charged with such hardship and suffering as Garibaldi offered to his volunteers; but he accepted it, and for nearly sixty years he lived and labored among his chosen people, for sweet love's sake. He found his little mountain cove as wretched as an Irish pigsty; he left it swept and garnished, renovated and reclaimed to the last inch.

His ideal of service kept him long at the task of preparation. At eighteen he took his Bachelor's degree at the University of Strasburg. Five years later he won his doctorate degree in philosophy; but still he lingered for richer scholarship. Then for three years he studied medicine and surgery while tutoring in the family of a noted physician. Meanwhile, he studied botany in the fields with the children.

His first service in his parish was not a sermon but the building of a school house. A hundred years ago Oberlin's school children were learning botany and agriculture, civics, manual arts and music, indeed, most of the things we struggle so hard to get into the country schools to-day. After awhile his wife

went down into the lowland to learn various cottage industries. Upon her return she moved about from home to home and taught them to his people.

He preached, to be sure, but also he served like a common hand in building the new public road and bridge they so much needed for contact with the outer world. He organized agricultural clubs. He kept them alive and active throughout his entire life. He wrote all over Europe to procure the flax, the wheat, the clover, the potatoes, and the fruit trees that would live and produce profitably in that inhospitable climate. He taught them irrigation, drainage, sanitation—or anything else they urgently needed to know. He was preacher, minister, pastor, farmer, physician, cobbler, carpenter and printer; but also prophet, priest, and king in his little dominion.

His religion was the gospel of social as well as spiritual regeneration; and we need just such a gospel to day everywhere: just such understanding and vision in our preachers and missionaries.

Mr. Roosevelt reminds us that our country civilization is vitally related to national well-being; but also he warns us that country-life decay is our gravest national problem. The country church, if it rightly conceive its mission, is our mightiest country-life defense. Therefore the work of the church, in our rural fields, cannot safely be left to the aged, the infirm, the untrained, the unattractive, the uninspiring, the dull or commonplace worker, whom the city churches reject and who must be placed elsewhere. It is not too much to say that such a policy is stupid and suicidal.

9. The defending, the preserving, and the enriching of our farm civilization calls for men of God who study social conditions with the insight and foresight of Isaiah of old. But it also calls for teachers who read and think and serve their fellows far beyond the walls of their schoolrooms; for physicians who campaign public health and hygiene as faithfully and as earnestly as they battle with death in their private practice; and for business men, editors, and statesmen who are brave enough and wise enough to "turn a keen untroubled eye home upon the instant need of things."

"The mission call is a call to make the world a brighter world for children to be born into, safer for boys and girls to grow up in, happier for men to travel through, and more joyous for departing saints to look back upon. . . . The Kingdom of God may well mean much more than this; but it is certain that it can never mean less."

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